

The Miami Herald

MAY 12, 2010

BUSINESS

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Networking key to success for busy lawyer-lobbyist



CHARLES TRAINOR JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Yolanda Cash Jackson meets with University of Florida Law School Dean Robert Jerry in Fort Lauderdale.

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It is lunchtime at the Fort Lauderdale law firm of Becker & Poliakoff and Yolanda Cash Jackson is doling out hugs to several dozen women in power suits and designer dresses gathered in the conference room. As they swap business cards and laughs over fried okra, Jackson encourages conversation around the room. She's determined that her guests leave with new contacts.

Networking is a skill Jackson, 51, has honed in her evolution from a litigator to a lobbyist, a big reason she wields unique power both at her law firm in Fort Lauderdale and the Capitol in Tallahassee. She has created this Sister to Sister group to give African-American women of influence a place to renew friendships and make connections. She's also taken some members of the group shopping — or rather, “relationship building.” “I use every opportunity because my work and my social life are intertwined,” Jackson tells me.

I am intrigued. For anyone who sees only the negative in making life about work, there's Jackson to prove them wrong. Hearing this woman enthusiastically describe her jam-packed schedule makes me rethink my whole concept of work-life balance. Jackson has blurred the line, and she's having a ball doing it.

She's the new breed of woman for whom work and all of its psychic rewards provide a fulfilling life. Sure she might experience fatigue and frustration at times, but she's able to cope because she's 110 percent immersed in something she finds meaningful.

“There are a lot of women who love their job, are fulfilled by their achievements and are in a place personally and professionally where they are treading new ground,” says Rosa de la Camara, a Miami partner at Becker & Poliakoff.

Jackson moves through the halls of the state Capitol, hacks through a round of golf or hosts a fundraising barbecue with a smile that has become her signature. Her day could start with a networking breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and end with a client dinner 14 hours later.

'SHE ENJOYS IT'

Law partner Bernie Friedman taught Jackson the ropes in Tallahassee and gets a thrill seeing her in action: “On the fourth floor of the Capitol, sometimes there will be 150 lobbyists in between the House and Senate. They will be worried crazy. Yolanda will be there with a great smile, talking to everyone and you can tell she enjoys it.”

Jackson's social nature goes back to her childhood, growing up in Miami's Liberty City. She earned badges as a Girl Scout alongside friends who now hold top positions in city, county and state government. Her father, a principal, held community meetings in the front yard.

Jackson, widowed at the young age of 35, remains close to her 27-year-old stepdaughter and visits her childhood neighborhood when she needs grounding. “My 80-year-old mom tells me to get in the car and drive to [Liberty] city. She tells me, ‘Check on the people who helped you get where you are, because soon they will be gone.’”

Outside her hometown, Jackson made key social connections in college, particularly through her Delta Sigma Theta sorority at the University of Florida. “I love Delta Days at the Capitol,” she says. After a short retail career, she graduated from UF's law school and now sits on the law school's board of trustees — the

only African-American woman at this time. That huge accomplishment has opened more doors giving her exposure to lawyers, judges and business people from around the state.

ADVOCATE

Jackson represents big corporations and health plans, but clearly she has claimed her niche as an advocate for minorities, representing Florida's historically black colleges and universities as well as municipalities. “Because I understand my community, I am a better advocate for its issues,” she says.

But having passion for what you do means being disappointed when a vote doesn't go your way. Florida legislator Hazelle Rogers says she has seen Jackson fighting through tears, passionately debating why legislators should continue to fund black colleges.

Beyond the evident passion, there's the reason initially I set out to learn more about Jackson. She and Rosa de la Camara are the first women to be elected to the seven-person management committee at their 37-year old Fort Lauderdale law firm. Having broken the glass ceiling, the women are initiating change, bringing perspective that differs from their white male counterparts.

Both women say that they openly have questioned decisions made only because “it's the way things always have been done” and they regularly voice concerns on behalf of the firm's diverse group of associates and staff.

Now, Jackson wants to teach younger women to meld work and life and have fun. She recently brought a 22-year-old female college student with her to a national conference of state legislators in Atlanta. Jackson took the young woman to a dinner meeting and to meet a top executive at AT&T. She brought her to a recognition ceremony, a shopping excursion, and to a club. “She was exhausted. I told her she needs to work on her stamina,” Jackson jokes.

Meanwhile, Jackson made an impression on her protégé. When they returned, the student posted this on Facebook: “wWent on my first business trip. Learned to work hard, play hard.”